

Education Committee
Wednesday, March 15, 2023

House Bill 6881: An Act Concerning Various Revisions to the Education Statutes Related to Educator Compensation and Paraeducators - Support

Senate Bill 1198: An Act Implementing the Recommendations of the School Indoor Air Quality Working Group - Support

Senator McCrory, Representative Currey, Senator Berthel, Representative McCarty and members of the Education Committee:

My name is Travis Woodward, I am a resident of Hamden, and an engineer in the Connecticut Department of Transportation. I am also the president of CSEA SEIU Local 2001, a labor union representing over 23,000 state, municipal, board of education, active and retired, public and private sector workers. Including thousands of paraeducator, as well as school nurses, cafeteria workers, bus workers, and other Board of Education employees. I offer the following testimony in support of House Bill 6881: An Act Concerning Various Revisions to the Education Statutes Related to Educator Compensation and Paraeducators and Senate Bill 1198: An Act Implementing the Recommendations of the School Indoor Air Quality Working Group:

House Bill 6881: An Act Concerning Various Revisions to the Education Statutes Related to Educator Compensation and Paraeducators. While I am proud to come before you today to advocate on behalf of Connecticut's paraeducators, I share the frustration of paras that we have to fight for legislation to ensure that they are compensated fairly and treated with dignity and respect.

Paraeducators are on the front lines of student learning. The critical work they do ranges from providing one-on-one assistance to special education students, reinforcing instruction, managing classrooms, and supporting English language learners. Without paraeducators, our schools would not be able to function and our children would not be receiving the education they need to succeed.

It cannot be surprising that many paraeducators are choosing to leave the profession. With over 1,300 paraeducator positions vacant in districts throughout the state, it is not a stretch to say that we are in a crisis. HB 6881 begins to improve the work, life, and career opportunities of Connecticut's paraeducators. Now is the time to act; our children, our schools, our paraeducators cannot wait.

As you listen to paraeducators today during this hearing, I ask that you take their stories to heart. They are a critical part of the educational process, but their salaries and benefits do not reflect this. Students, parents, and teachers will tell you how important paras are, but they are often left out of

Planning and Placement Team meetings. And, with no concerted and centralized effort to collect data regarding paraeducators for the state-wide public school information system, Connecticut has built a system that fails to properly utilize paraeducators. House Bill 6881 addresses these issues head on and gives paraeducators, school districts, policymakers, teachers, parents, and students needed tools to ensure our schools are not just high quality, but the best in the nation.

To paraphrase a song lyric: paraeducators and high achieving students, you can't have one without the other.

Now is the time for this committee and all the members of the General Assembly to take immediate and meaningful action to raise paraeducator pay, lower their healthcare costs, ensure they have meaningful retirement benefits, and give them what they need to help students (and schools and teachers and parents) succeed.

Senate Bill 1198: An Act Implementing the Recommendations of the School Indoor Air Quality Working Group. Connecticut schools continue to exhibit conditions that promote mold, poor air quality, and temperature and humidity levels that undermine teaching and learning. Pet shops in Connecticut have statutory minimum and maximum temperatures, but schools do not. The legislature made progress in 2022 providing funding for some remediation and establishing a work group to provide recommendations back to the legislature for 2023. However, with over 500 schools with poor HVAC systems or no air conditioning at all, more needs to be done. Additionally, without temperature and humidity standards in place, school districts will continue to defer maintenance and remediation.

When the coronavirus reached us in March of 2020, it became immediately apparent that our failure to invest in maintaining and improving the ventilation systems in our public school buildings would have serious consequences. Our desire to safely reopen our schools was significantly compromised by our inability to guarantee the necessary air filtration. SB 1198 will help our state respond to this challenge by establishing minimum and maximum indoor temperature and humidity standards, enacting oversight and enforcement mechanisms to ensure compliance with new school indoor air quality requirements, and providing sustained, long-term funding sources to assist municipalities with school infrastructure improvements including repairing HVAC systems, or in some cases installing air conditioning.

While we support this bill, there are some changes that can be made that will improve it. Routine walk-through inspections spelled out in Sec. 3 (2) of the bill are required every three years when they should be conducted annually. Annual walkthroughs are consistent with best practices as outlined by the Tools for Schools program. Annual walkthroughs were also included in the recommendations that were approved by the official school IAQ working group. However, while building walk-through inspections should be conducted and be posted to the district's website annually, reporting to the state should take place every 5 years (at the same time as a thorough 5 year

inspection), not every year. Reporting requirements under 10-220(a) currently require reporting every 5 years. This inspection should be required for all schools, not just those constructed or renovated after January 2003. Finally, there needs to be a clear start date for inspections required under Sec. 3 (2).

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. Please support student learning by prioritizing paraeducators and passing House Bill 6881. And, please support safe indoor air quality in our schools by supporting Senate Bill 1198.

Travis Woodward
President, CSEA SEIU Local 2001